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SIPDIS

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TAGS: PHUM PREL SOCI TU VT

SUBJECT: TURKISH DIPLOMAT SOUR ON RELATIONS WITH VATICAN

REF: 04 VATICAN 3196; ISTANBUL 1333; ANKARA 4653

CLASSIFIED BY: Peter Martin, Political Officer, POL, STATE.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

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Summary  
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1. (C) Turkish diplomat Ali Riza Ozcoskun (protect) complained to us recently about the poor state of Holy See - Turkish relations, charging that there is simply no dialogue between the two states. He went over the well-known stalemate, explaining that the Catholic Church sought certain legal assurances from Turkey that as a secular state it could not offer. Ozcoskun judged the potential papal trip to Istanbul to be a no-win situation for the GoT under the circumstances, since the pope going to Istanbul without meeting top-level Turkish authorities would be just as bad as his forgoing the trip altogether. Ozcoskun recognizes that the Vatican's official position on Turkey's EU candidacy is that it sees "no obstacle" to its entry as long as the GoT fulfills the EU's Copenhagen criteria. But he said the Holy See had not been straightforward enough in correcting misimpressions of that policy when cardinals or others in the hierarchy - most notably Cardinal Ratzinger - strayed from the party line. It is unclear if the papal trip to Istanbul will actually occur, but if it does it will have as much of a political subtext as an ecumenical one. End Summary.

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"What Relations?"  
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2 (C) Ali Riza Ozcoskun (protect), the outgoing DCM at the Embassy of Turkey to the Holy See, told us recently that Vatican-Turkey relations were on the rocks. "What relations?" he retorted when asked about the state of affairs between the two countries. He complained that the two had no dialogue, and that the last time a high-level GoT minister came to Rome, Ozcoskun had a hard time convincing him he should see anyone at the Vatican. "What could I say?" he said. "There's nothing to talk about."

3. (C) Ozcoskun went over the well-known stalemate, explaining that the Catholic Church sought certain legal assurances from Turkey that as a secular state it could not offer. "We don't do this to discriminate against Christians," he said, "but to guard against radical Muslims." In the event of Turkish entry into the EU, he said, the stance would become moot in any case, as Turkey would have to adhere to EU norms. For this reason he thought it silly that some within the Vatican were lukewarm or worse towards Turkey joining the club. In fact, it would bring them many of the things they're looking for, he insisted.

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Papal Visit to Istanbul  
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4. (C) Pope Benedict is considering a visit to the Ecumenical Patriarch in Istanbul for the November 30 feast of St. Andrew, an event of great importance to the Orthodox. According to Ozcoskun, even the consideration of the trip is a no-win situation for the GoT under the circumstances. "If the pope comes and doesn't make it a state visit, it looks bad for Turkey. If he doesn't come, it still looks bad for Turkey," he said. Ozcoskun recounted that he had proposed that the GoT organize a conference to be attended by the top leaders in Istanbul just before the possible papal visit. In this way, Turkey could manufacture an opportunity for a meeting with the pope in a face-saving way, since, according to Ozcoskun, Benedict would certainly not go to Ankara. Ozcoskun didn't get much of a hearing on the idea. Ankara is "in no mood" to bend over backwards for the Vatican, he reported.

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EU Membership  
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5. (C) Ozcoskun was sensitive about Pope Benedict's highly publicized criticism of Turkey's EU candidacy (made as Cardinal Ratzinger prior to his election as pope). When reminded that the official line of the Holy See on the issue was one of neutrality as long as Turkey lived up to the EU's Copenhagen

criteria (04 VATICAN 3196), Ozcoskun agreed, but was not satisfied. "[At the time of the Ratzinger interview] and at other times, the Vatican insists that it isn't against us, but they always do so in private." [Comment: Ozcoskun makes a good point - at the time of the Ratzinger controversy we spoke with FM Lajolo and encouraged him to reinforce the Holy See's view in light of confusing media accounts of Ratzinger's comments. He

confirmed the Vatican position, but did not counter the cardinal in public. End Comment] Ozcoskun said he didn't think Vatican opposition could thwart Turkey's EU bid, but "could certainly make it more difficult."

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The Pope of the Orthodox  
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16. (C) Ozcoskun did not seem to be current on tensions between Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and the GoT. When asked, for example, about recent controversy surrounding a youth summer camp sponsored by Bartholomew (ISTANBUL 1333; ANKARA 4653), Ozcoskun waved it off. "There's always something," he said. He claimed that Bartholomew was trying to become "the pope of the Orthodox," but suggested that tensions among the various patriarchs, particularly with Moscow, would thwart his goals.

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Comment  
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17. (C) The Holy See is still considering the Istanbul trip, though at World Youth Day in Cologne August 20, the Vatican spokesman said that nothing had been fixed on the calendar. A curial contact told us August 25 that he "wouldn't bet the grocery money" on the trip actually happening, but others have noted the strong appeal to Pope Benedict of making a grand gesture for Catholic-Orthodox relations. The thrust for him and for many would be this ecumenical relationship, but there would be no escaping the diplomatic subtext of Turkey and the EU. As for Ozcoskun, we had not had substantial contact with him before this farewell call. He does not seem to have been very active in the Vatican diplomatic corps, and is certainly happy to be heading back to Ankara now.

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